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ABSTRACT

Forty-four 5th graders and their mothers were interviewed about parental discipline practices toward the child. Responses were coded as indicating parental use of power assertion, love-withdrawal, or teaching (induction). Mother-child agreement and the interrelationships among the discipline types are discussed. Sex of child, measures of SES, and family size were significant predictors of parental discipline. Boys received more power assertion and love-withdrawal, and less teaching than did girls. Indicators of social status (parent education, parent occupation) related negatively to use of power assertion. Larger family size was associated with increased use of power assertion and decreased use of teaching among boys, but among girls the relationships were reversed. Processes by which these demographic variables influence parents are proposed. (Author)

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DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTAL DISCIPLINE TECHNIQUES*

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Introduction

The developmental literature of the last fifty years abounds with studies on the effects of parental child rearing practices on the child (see, for example, Becker, 1964; Goslin, 1969; Maccoby, 1975). Fewer studies, however, have investigated the determinants of these child rearing practices, the factors which influence the selection and use of socialization techniques by parents. This report presents findings on demographic variables correlated with parental discipline techniques, and suggests processes by which these variables might influence parental behavior.

Following Hoffman (1970; Hoffman and Saltzstein, 1967), three types of parental discipline practices may be differentiated. Power assertion involves the use of physical or material sanctions to control the child's behavior, and includes physical punishment, withdrawal of privileges, and threats of these. The underlying message in this type of discipline is:

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"You'll do it because I say so!" Love-withdrawal signifies the use of the withdrawal of parental love and affection, or the threat of it, as punishment for transgression and as a means to control behavior. These techniques include acting upset or hurt (including anger, yelling, or showing disapproval), isolating or ignoring the child, and making him/her feel bad about his/her action. The understood connotation in love-withdrawal is the at least implicit suggestion by the parent that "if you're bad, I won't love you." Teaching techniques involve the parent's use of reasoning, role-taking, or discussion without punishment, focusing the child's attention on the negative consequences of his/her behavior for other people. This type of discipline is similar to what Hoffman and Saltzstein (1967) have called "induction regarding peers;" I have chosen to call it teaching here to differentiate it from their concept of "induction regarding parents," which seems to me to include a certain level of love-withdrawal.

Method

Subjects. The sample was comprised of 44 fifth-graders, evenly divided between males and females, from a suburban public school. The median age was 10 years 7 months. The sample was Caucasian and middle- to upper-middle-SES.

Procedure. Ss and their mothers were interviewed separately about the discipline techniques used by the parents toward the child. The respondents were asked to focus on the period from when the child was "five or six" to the present, and to describe the discipline practices of both parents.

The questions asked of the child and mother were similar. Both interviews contained four hypothetical transgression situations (adapted from the measures of Hoffman and Saltzstein, 1967), including carelessness, selfishness, lying, and inconsideration. For each situation, the respondent was asked the absolute and relative frequencies of a list of possible parental actions in that situation; he/she was encouraged to generate other actions which might be used by the parents in the family. Child and mother were also asked about parental behavior toward transgression in general; the mother additionally responded to questions on parental attitudes toward child rearing. Responses were coded as power assertion, love-withdrawal, or teaching; for each technique, a summary score was obtained for each child's report and each mother's report.

Results and discussion

Mother-child agreement

The correlations between child's and mother's reports for each discipline technique are shown in Table 1. The agreement between mother and

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Table 1 about here

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child on parental power assertion and love-withdrawal is substantial though far from perfect. Power assertion would seem the most concrete of the three techniques and consequently we would expect the highest level of agreement on it. The low agreement on teaching is harder to explain, and we may suggest two alternatives. First, since use of teaching techniques is currently the "recommended" discipline practice, the mothers

might be shading their responses in a socially desirable direction. In this case the child's report might be more valid than that of the mother. Robbins (1963) and Wenar and Coulter (1962) have found evidence of parental misreporting of factual child rearing data in the direction of practices recommended by "experts." A second explanation is that the questions measuring teaching techniques were too abstract for the children to provide accurate answers. While the questions were worded to be as concrete as possible, a child may be less likely to remember a discussion than a spanking. In this case the mother's report might be the more valid of the two. Both reports will therefore be used in this analysis.

Relative use of each discipline technique

The intercorrelations among power assertion, love-withdrawal, and teaching for child's and mother's reports are presented in Table 2. By

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Table 2 about here

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both interviewees' accounts, use of power assertion and love-withdrawal were substantially positively correlated, and both of these were substantially negatively correlated with use of teaching. This pattern suggests the similarity between power assertion and love-withdrawal in that they are both punishment-oriented techniques, in which the child receives aversive stimulation from the parents; they may be used in conjunction with one another. By contrast, teaching is a non-punishment technique and thus is conceptually incompatible with power assertion and love-withdrawal. The extent of this unidimensionality was assessed by performing principle component factor analyses on the discipline scores. A single factor, on which

all three techniques loaded highly, accounted for 70.8% (child's report) and 70.5% (mother's report) of the total variance in child rearing practices.

The effect of the child's sex

One demographic factor which may influence parental behavior is sex of child. Boys received more love-withdrawal than girls by both child's ($p < .01$) and mother's ($p < .05$) reports. Boys also received more power assertion than did girls (child's report, $p = .06$; mother's report, $p = .06$; report's combined with equal weightings, $p < .04$). Parents were more likely to use teaching techniques with girls (child's report, $p = .13$; mother's report, $p = .04$; combined reports, $p < .03$). The results for power assertion and teaching replicate findings already in the literature; the finding that boys receive more love-withdrawal has not previously been reported (Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974).

Two explanations for this pattern of findings, that parents use more punishment-oriented discipline with boys and more reason-oriented, non-punishment techniques with girls, may be suggested. It is possible that parents believe, from sex-stereotypes prevalent in our culture, that punishment-oriented techniques are more appropriate for, or more effective with, boys than girls. However, it is unclear whether our sex-role stereotypes would hold that use of love-withdrawal is more suited to boys. Alternatively, parents may be responding with more punitive discipline to an initially higher level of disobedience or resistance to control among boys (Minton, Kagan, and Levine, 1971).

Measures of socio-economic status

An index of parental education was computed, averaging the educational level achieved by both parents. As an indicator of SES, the range of this

index was somewhat restricted, since few parents in this sample were at the lower end of the scale. Still, this variable was a significant predictor of the child's report of parental power assertion, which decreased with increasing parental education ($r = -.30$, $p < .05$). This was especially true for boys as reported both by child ($r = -.50$, $p < .02$) and by mother ($r = -.60$, $p < .005$); the correlations did not differ significantly from zero for girls. Parental discipline was similarly predicted by an index of parental occupational status (computed following Hollingshead, 1957), which correlated highly with parent education ($r = .81$, $p < .001$).

These findings are consistent with previously reported relationships (see Bronfenbrenner, 1958; Hess, 1970) but the mediating processes remain unclear. Perhaps lower-SES adults are more likely to perceive social relationships in terms of power and authority, and thus use more power-oriented techniques with their children. Possibly a lower-SES parent derives child rearing norms from a background in which use of power assertive techniques with boys was prescribed. Or perhaps less educated parents are less able to defend their demands on the child with reasoning and thus are more likely to fall back on punitive practices to support their demands. The potential importance of the parent's job in these effects is suggested by a significant negative relationship, among boys, between parental occupation and power assertion (child's report), even with parent education partialled out ($r = -.48$, $p < .05$).

Family size

Previous evidence suggests that parents in larger families exercise more authority and control than do parents with fewer children (Bossard and Boll, 1956; Elder and Bowerman, 1963; Clausen, 1966; White, 1972).

However, these studies have not always controlled for SES, which covaries with family size; the present data suggest that the relationship may be more complex. With increasing family size, boys reported greater parental use of power assertion ($r = .60$, $p < .005$) and less use of teaching ($r = -.50$, $p < .02$); while girls tended to report less parental power assertion ($r = -.40$, $p < .07$) and more parental teaching ($r = .38$, $p < .08$). Further, when the indices of SES were controlled, the partial correlations remained significant beyond the .05 level for boys and the .10 level for girls, suggesting that SES is not confounded in this relationship. The maternal report of child rearing practices produced results in the same direction but not approaching significance. Thus, parents appear to be using more sex-stereotyped discipline with increasing family size. Perhaps with a greater number of children, parents have less time to tailor their discipline techniques to each individual child, and thus are more likely to allow sex roles to influence these practices.

Conclusions

The data presented here show that sex of child, measures of SES (parent education and occupation), and family size are significant predictors of parental discipline practices. While these relationships suggest likely variables on which to study the antecedents of child rearing practices, they do not identify the processes by which these factors influence the parents. For each of the three variables, hypotheses have been proposed regarding these mechanisms, but the processes remain untested on the within-group level. For example, if greater parental use of punishment-oriented techniques with boys is a response to boys' greater disobedience and re-

sistance, then we ought to find that, within each sex group, the more disobedient and resistant children will receive more power assertion and love-withdrawal, and less teaching, than children who are more compliant. On the other hand, if this sex difference is due to parental sex-typing, then parents whose conceptions of sex roles are less stereotyped would be expected to treat their children in a more sex-blind fashion. Further research must be addressed to other factors which influence parental child rearing practices, and to the processes which mediate these influences.

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Demographic factors influencing

parental discipline techniques

John Unger Zussman

Table 1

Correlations between child's and mother's reports

Technique	Pearson r
Power assertion	.66***
Love-withdrawal	.52***
Teaching	.26+

Table 2

Intercorrelations among discipline techniques

	Pearson r	
Techniques	Child's report	Mother's report
Power assertion - Love-withdrawal	.60***	.39**
Power assertion - Teaching	-.63***	-.60***
Love-withdrawal - Teaching	-.45**	-.67***

(For both tables, N = 44. All significance tests are two-tailed. + $p < .10$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$)